

Letter from Scotland



Potatoes surviving the heat wave...but only just.

The potato, wheat and barley fields of the Black Isle looked idyllic in the sunshine of this extraordinary Scottish summer. An old friend and I cycled round this forgotten peninsula, just north of Inverness, on our annual biking holiday, wondering where the water had come from to make the crops appear so hale and healthy and the rivers still flow quietly to the sea.

We may be deluged with rain this weekend but it comes at the end of a month of blisteringly hot, dry weather and after the driest June on record. Of course, things are not so idyllic beneath the surface. The potatoes have needed a lot of irrigation, the wheat and barley will not be so full grained as usual and the cattle and sheep have eaten into their winter fodder, leaving farmers looking to the government for help.

Tourists and holiday-makers were sitting under parasols outside the tea-shops everywhere we went. They must have

formed a strange impression of a Scottish summer. The golf courses were burnt out, except for the well-watered greens. The reservoirs were low. Yet surprisingly, there were no hose-pipe bans or restrictions on water use. The earth, the black earth of the Black Isle, must be holding water like a sponge from the rains of the winter.

Scotland has not been as hot as England, temperatures in the 20s Centigrade rather than the 30s and we could only watch with cool sympathy as our southern neighbours boiled like lobsters in a pot. In the stifling courtrooms of London, the Scottish Parliament's "Continuity Bill" was being challenged by the UK Government. It insists that Brexit legislation applies to Scotland as much as the rest of the UK, even though powers over agriculture and food standards have been devolved. Needless to say judges at the Supreme Court will take weeks to give their verdict.

Meanwhile the damaging effects of Brexit are already being felt in Scotland. Fruit crops in Fife and Perthshire have been left to rot in the fields because of a shortage of pickers from Eastern Europe. Last year some 9,000 seasonal agricultural workers were employed in Scotland – fewer than were actually needed – and 60 per cent of them said they would not be returning this year. That was partly due to the fall in the value of the pound and better conditions at home, but the fear over Brexit was also a factor. In another example, the number of teachers from the EU applying to teach in Scotland has fallen dramatically, from 186 last year to just 14 this year.

The Fraser of Allander Institute put out a report this week suggesting that if there is a hard Brexit, Scottish growth would fall by 5 per cent, meaning a drop in average wages of £2,000 a year and 80,000 fewer jobs.

Still, Brexit may never happen and Barclays Bank cheered us up with an announcement that it is to build a new campus on the

banks of the Clyde in Glasgow, employing 2,500 staff. And Donald Trump's sons (who now run his Scottish businesses) have finally come up with their plans to build a £150m luxury housing estate on his golf course in Aberdeenshire. So not everyone thinks we're doomed.....though the dunes are doomed.

A long awaited report into child abuse in football has been published by the Scottish Football Association. It was set up December 2016 after a number of historic abuse cases came to light. The inquiry, led by Martin Henry, a former police officer and head of a children's charity, found that the SFA's safeguarding system was not fit for purpose. It talks of gaps in the system, a lack of resources and poor supervision of affiliated clubs. The SFA's chief executive Ian Maxell has apologised to victims and said the report's recommendations would be accepted. He insisted that football is now "a safe place for children."



Image courtesy of SCOTRAIL

The new Class 385 trains are pictured at the Millerhill depot

ScotRail's new fleet of electric trains has started to arrive at a platform near me. The first of 70 Hitachi 385s began operating between Edinburgh and Glasgow on Wednesday. There's

been a delay of course. This was due to the driver's windscreen being built at the wrong angle, so the driver couldn't see the signals easily. Happily, all is now well and I just hope the new trains have enough room for my bicycle.

Soon, trains won't need drivers at all if present trends continue. Already the Scottish bus company Stagecoach and bus builders Alexander Dennis are experimenting with a driver-less bus. They've produced the first single-decker which is busy learning how to park and go to the fuel pumps and the bus wash, but all in the depot.

Finally, it was heartening to see the parade of Down's Syndrome delegates at their world congress in Glasgow this week. They were carrying flags from 70 countries and what joy shone from their faces. The three day event brought together experts and parents of Down Syndrome children and young people to discuss the latest research into the condition and developments in health, education, employment and independent living.

We are all handicapped in one way or another and here was an international congress declaring that we can all participate in society, and all have a happy and useful life.